

## CRIME IN VICTORIAN DORNEY

Local newspapers are a great source of detail about the past, and fortunately for us, large chunks of historical issues of the *Windsor and Eton Express* can be seen online, at [www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk). Just like now, crime was well reported, and here I'm taking a look at events which affected Dorney residents in the period up to 1860.

Most of the misdemeanours were fairly minor, and were dealt with by the Petty Sessions (equivalent to our Magistrates' Court) which met in Burnham or Eton. Typically, people stole crops from the fields – potatoes, cabbages, turnips, hay – or poultry from the chicken coops. Fences were damaged, and there was occasional poaching. In 1859, an 8 year-old boy was convicted of smearing mud on pillars at Dorney Court – the only lad to get caught doing what was apparently a common annoyance when the boys were on their way home from school. In these years before motor vehicles, driving offences still occurred, and John Perryman was found guilty in 1842 of driving his cart into that of an elderly chairmaker (loaded with 17 chairs), causing injury to the old man and damage to his cart. Punishment was a fine or a short prison sentence.

More serious crimes, judged at the County Assizes, merited harsher retribution, but I was still surprised to find a burglar sentenced to death in 1818 for a robbery on the Martin family home in Dorney. I suspect this sentence was subsequently commuted to transportation. The Martins' house was broken into again in 1826, during the day when the residents were out working in the fields. The thieves got in by taking a pane of glass out of an upstairs back bedroom window, and stole clothing including a frock coat, trousers, waistcoats and a hat. In 1843, the theft of 200lbs of bacon from William Trumper resulted in transportation for life.

As the biggest farmers in Dorney, the Trumpers were always vulnerable to criminals. Horse stealing was a common crime, and the Trumpers had horses taken from their stables at night in 1826 and 1830. Travellers were at risk of highway robbery, and William Trumper was attacked more than once when returning home along the Bath Road in the evening. In 1834 he was robbed of a silver watch and £35 in bank notes. Just over three years later, when riding back from Reading in his gig, he was stopped by two men who made the classic demand of "*your money or your life*". When he resisted, he was assaulted, dislocating his shoulder, and 12s was taken from his pockets at gunpoint. Unsurprisingly, the Trumpers subscribed to the local Salthill Society, an

organisation set up by businessmen and residents to raise funds “*for the prosecution of felons and thieves*”. This was in the days before a police force, when each parish elected a constable to maintain law and order, and victims of crime had to bring prosecutions themselves.

By 1840, we read of a “police constable” who had been employed to watch the property of J Palmer Esq in Dorney. It’s not clear whether this was a private security guard, or a publicly funded constable, perhaps recruited under new initiatives to establish rural constabularies. Newspaper reports then begin, by 1842, to refer to John Larkin, described as “chief constable of Iver” but clearly involved in investigating crimes in the wider area of South Bucks. On at least one occasion, his help was sought by a Mr Jerome, the “high constable of Eton”. John Larkin was vigorous in his pursuit of criminals, even when the crimes were relatively minor, and in 1847 it was reported at a court hearing that he needed more time to make enquiries, “*having been much employed lately in search of prisoners*”. The press saw him as “*a most active and eager member of the police*”. Sadly, his reputation was severely damaged during the trial of a robbery at Dorney Vicarage.

The Rev George Bull, curate of Dorney, had a young groom, James Clark, who was arrested on suspicion of having stolen a quantity of gold and silver plate from his master, in June 1847. Clark was said to be living above his means, drinking and gambling at a beer shop on Monkey Island, where he had taken the items to dispose of. However, it came out in court that Clark had been persuaded to steal the goods by a hawker, who had separately agreed with John Larkin to share the £20 reward offered by the Rev Bull. Having confessed to the crime, Clark was convicted, and sentenced to 12 months hard labour. Larkin was condemned by the judge as having “*conducted himself in a most reprehensible manner*”, and would probably have lost his job had he not died in the interim.

In October 1850, the newspaper’s editorial expressed grave concern about high levels of crime in the absence of an organised police force. Anxiety was high throughout the south of England because of the activities of the Frimley gang, so-called because they had shot dead a clergyman during a robbery on his house in Frimley. This gang of young men from Kent, Sussex and Surrey specialised in armed housebreaking, and were undertaking burglaries on an almost nightly basis. The crime wave around Dorney was not so serious, but farmhouses on Dorney Common had been burgled by suspected masked men. The Buckinghamshire Constabulary was finally established in 1857.